DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 298 477 CS 009 336

TITLE Read-Aloud Programs for the Elderly. Check This Out Series.
INSTITUTION Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Oct 88
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Institutionalized Persons; Library Materials; *Library Services; *Nursing Homes; *Older Adults; *Outreach Programs; *Reading Aloud to Others; Volunteers
IDENTIFIERS Library Services and Construction Act

ABSTRACT

In order to provide regular read-aloud programs in nursing homes, to mentally stimulate and enrich the institutionalized elderly, and to improve access to library materials and services a project, proposed by the Seattle Public Library, provided training for volunteers in read-aloud techniques, sensitivity to nursing home residents, and meeting the needs of the frail elderly. A by-product of the project, funded with money from the Library Services and Construction Act, was the development of an instructional manual for use by library staff, volunteer coordinators, and activity directors interested in conducting read-aloud programs. Staff and volunteers conducted 372 programs for 3,396 residents in 9 months, with volunteers contributing 90% of the programming time. The results of the project led to its incorporation into the overall outreach program of the library and the creation of an annotated bibliography of more than 200 titles appropriate for read-aloud programs. (MS)

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Read-Aloud Programs for the Elderly

Audience: Residents of nine area nursing homes, approximately 3,000 elderly people.

Need: Improve the quality of service to nursing home patients.

Objectives:

- To provide regular read-aloud programs in nursing homes.
- To mentally stimulate and enrich the institutionalized elderly.
- To improve access to library materials and services.

Budget: Total $46,998 from the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA Title I).

Background: In 1985, the Seattle Public Library applied for a grant to develop read-aloud programs for the elderly. The library based its proposal on a 1978 project conducted at the Mary L. Cook Public Library in Waynesville, Ohio. The Seattle proposal was approved in 1986, and the Washington State Library funded the 1-year project using LSCA money. Mobile Services, the department responsible for the project, had a long, established track record—over 14 years—in library service delivery to nursing home residents. In 1986, the nursing home and intermediate care component represented 11 percent of the circulation and 13 percent of the patron visits for the department. However, reductions in the overall Mobile Services budget made it all but impossible to establish or maintain creative programming. A telephone survey revealed that nine of the nursing home facilities receiving monthly bookmobile visits had insufficient funds to provide a regularly scheduled reading program for their residents, whose average age was 80 to 85 years.

Activities: The project provided training for volunteers in read-aloud techniques, sensitivity to nursing home residents, and meeting the needs of the frail elderly. A by-product of the project was the development of an instructional manual for use by library staff, volunteer coordinators, and activity directors interested in conducting read-aloud programs. Volunteers were asked to make a 3-month commitment to the project, working approximately 5 hours per week. Each volunteer worked as part of a team of two at an assigned nursing home. As partners, volunteers were able to aid each other in group interaction, support each other in finding materials, and learn from each other. They conducted hour-long programs designed for groups of approximately 10 residents. Each program involved three parts. The first was a warm-up session of reading local news or a brief magazine article, discussing current events, and doing other activities designed to encourage group participation. Following this, the volunteers read a chapter of a novel, a short story, or a work of poetry previously selected by the group. The final activity concentrated on a discussion of the readings and ended with participants requesting readings for the next session.

Evaluation: The original project goal was to develop a cadre of 30 to 40 trained volunteers to offer 370 read-aloud programs to the 3,000 residents of nine nursing homes weekly or twice weekly. Staff and volunteers conducted 372 programs for 3,396 residents in 9-months, with volunteers contributing 90 percent of the programming time. The average attendance per session was nine residents; 148 programs were held weekly at five sites and 224 programs were held twice weekly at four sites. During the length of the project, monthly circulation figures, as compared with the previous year's statistics for the same period, indicated an increase of 943 items, or 40 percent. Although no pre- or post-testing of residents was conducted, feedback from activity directors indicated that health care staff unanimously felt that the read-aloud activity was

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having a positive effect on participants. Seven of the 39 volunteers (18 percent) completed at least the minimal 3-month commitment requested, with an additional 22 (56 percent) completing 4 months or more. By the end of the project period, 29 active volunteers had been placed and 3 more were waiting to be placed. Because the read-aloud project was so successful, it was incorporated into the overall outreach program of Mobile Services.

Adoption: The library developed a comprehensive program to prepare volunteers to participate in the read-aloud programs. Training emphasized the role of the read-aloud volunteer in an institutionalized setting; the special needs of nursing home residents; and the selection, preparation, and presentation of read-aloud materials. The library developed a self-instructional manual for managers and volunteer readers interested in establishing read-aloud programs. The manual identifies some of the key strategies for organizing a program, recruiting and training volunteers, and conducting a reading session. One of the most valuable products of the project was an annotated bibliography of more than 200 titles appropriate for read-aloud programs. The list is organized alphabetically by author, with an index by subject and title, and a separate listing of picture books appropriate for use with adult audiences.

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October 1988

LP 89–731